

[Four Women]

Mari Tomasi Men Against Granite

Recorded in

Writers' Section Files

DATE: SEP 3 1940

FOUR WOMEN

1. Scotch Quarryman's Widow.

The yellow house on Quarry Hill had seen better days. Two tiers of kitchen porches sagged beneath the weight of ice-boxes and chairs. The woman spoke from behind the screen door of the lower porch. She fumbled with her apron, and wiped her red hands dry. "Sure, come in." A good natured smile wrinkled the corners of her blue eyes and wide, firm mouth. "Alex said you would be coming today. Come in.

"This used to be a rooming and boarding house for quarrymen. My mother-in-law ran it when she came from Scotland. She did well. Her husband worked in the quarries. They worked full time those days, and what with the board-and-room money and being thrifty, and having only one child—that was my husband, Johnny—they were able to buy the house for their own. No, I was born in Barre. Me and Johnny, we came here to live after his folks died. There aren't so many single quarry workers as there were years back so we did away with most of the roomers. We've made it into two apartments. The family upstairs have no roomers at all. I've taken in two since Johnny died, that was three years ago. Lots of the single fellows have cars now, they'd rather ride back and forth to work, and live in Barre where there's more going on.

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"They haven't been very busy in the quarries this spring. 2 My roomer Alex is working only three days a week now. And pretty soon there'll be a two weeks' rest. There always is after Memorial Day.

"My husband didn't die of stonecutters' t. b. but I've seen it take plenty around here. It was an accident he had, right here in our yard. It was the fall of the year and the kitchen steps were slippery with the first snow. He slipped and cut his arm on the axe he'd been chopping kindling with. He got infection, and on top of that he had to have an operation. It was too much for him. All those times he climbed up and down the quarries, with me worrying and begging him to be careful, and he never got any more than a crushed finger. And then to have it happen on his own doorsteps it seemed more than I could bear. Of course, there're accidents in those holes, there's bound to be. One fellow was killed last year. Have you ever watched a good quarryman climb up and down those granite walls? It's worth your time. I used to hold my breath watching them; I still do. I know one old man, a Frenchman, who's been here, he says, since 1892, he swings a couple of 5-ft. iron bars across a shoulder, and steps down those dangerous walls without so much as laying a finger to the granite for support. He works in a small quarry. Sometimes his hat, face and clothes are so grey with dust that he looks like a loosened piece of the stone wall, rolling to the bottom.

"Most of the quarrymen are Union men. Both my roomers are. It pays to belong. They've got a quarry life ahead of them and they might as well enjoy the Union benefits. Some of the older ones don't seem to care any more, they slip up 3 on their dues.

"I have two sons. Good boys they are, too. They didn't want to work here after they left school, nor did I want them to. Their father always said it was like burying yourself in a stone grave and hardly knowing there was a world and sun around you, and what pay do you get? Good enough, by the day, but there's always a month or two you lose in the winter when the snow's bad, and the ice. Then there are seasons when the business is

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slow, like now. It doesn't pay, there's no future for a young fellow. I was glad my boys got clerking jobs in Barre.

"They're both married. John, the oldest, married an Irish girl, a neighbor here, her father'd had a small quarry 'way up back there. It wasn't good granite, he didn't do well so he stopped working it. The other boy married a Scotch girl.

"The oldest boy doesn't make much money. He was thinking of coming back here and taking the upstairs apartment, it would cost him less than living in Barre. But much as I would like to have him here with me, I advised him against it. It's no place to bring up lively children. I had my hands full when John and Pete were little ones and always that eager to explore those hills of waste granite and the quarries. And high up as we are here with always a little breeze, I can't help feeling that the air is full of dust. Sometimes when the wind is strong you'll see whole clouds of grey up there, almost as if a storm was coming up. Now Pete, he'd like me to live with him in Barre, but I'm still capable of taking care of myself.

"I don't mind the quarry noises. I've been here so long. 4 If I awake at night, I sort of miss them. And days when they don't work I miss them. Looking at those piles of waste granite isn't a pretty sight, but I can look out my window at night and see the lights of Barre. It's a nice picture. And day times I can see for miles around, I can see hills that are green, and fields that in the spring are just brown, upturned earth, I can watch them through the summer getting green with crops. It seems good to look at green hills that aren't spoiled with quarry holes and those grey waste piles."

2. French Letterer's Widow.

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The woodbine shaded porch overlooked the cement highway and the river across which lay the long gray string of Barres' stone sheds. Mrs. Lachance sat in a rocker peeling potatoes.

"You will excuse me if I go right on and peel," she said. "I have just so much time before supper, and so many things to be done. Potatoes! I have to cook mountains of them to satisfy the men. Ten of them here, and all but one are stonecutters.

"I've had as many as eighteen boarding here, but with that number I have to take on an extra girl. With only ten, my daughter and myself manage. If my daughter happens to want the evening we hire a girl from next door to help with the dishes.

"I haven't always taken in boarders. It is only since my husband died nine years ago. Before that, I didn't have to. He made enough for us to get along well. He was a letter carver. 5 Seventeen years he'd worked at it. Most of the time in Barre, but one year in Montpelier.

"I don't take roomers, you can see the house isn't big enough for that. Since two of the girls were married we've given one upstairs bedroom to the family on the other side. My youngest girl graduates from high school next year. There was an older boy, he died at the time of the 'flu'. He was just a baby.

"I was born here in Barre. My husband came down from Chambly, Canada, with his folks when he was a boy. They were a farming family. He started working in the sheds when he was eighteen. Doing odd labor, but he worked up to letter carver. He made good money, but I wasn't happy having him in the sheds. It's bad, especially for a man with a family, and most of the French stonecutters around here have large families. Sometimes I think granite isn't worth all the sorrow it brings, but it's there in the earth, it's worth money to the owners, and if a man works there, well—there's no one to blame but himself. My husband used to say so, he still said so when he was flat on his back. You'd think it would

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have made him bitter. It didn't. He was resigned to it. He accepted it as something he had expected all along. He didn't mind talking to me about it, but when his friends visited him—other stonecutters—neither he nor they would mention the sickness that takes so many of them. Perhaps they are all like that. They'll talk about it only to those who are dear to them or, sometimes, to a stranger they never expect to see again.*

Mrs. Lachance paused to give orders concerning the supper 6 to her daughter who had appeared at the kitchen door. She was a small girl with her mother's red cheeks, and an abundance of black, wavy hair. Underneath the apron she wore a black-and-white checked taffeta dress.

When she had disappeared into the kitchen, the mother confided in a low voice, "She's going to a dance tonight at Joe's Pond. That's why she's all dressed for going out. She goes with a French boy ——" She hesitated as if undecided to continue. "Well, I guess I don't mind your knowing it. She goes with that boy I was telling you about, the one who lost his father and two brothers from t.b. He's a fine boy, I like him, but I can't help wish that it was someone else. Someone strong and well. I'd hate to think of her losing her husband as I did. Usually they are sick for a long time. And afterwards, to be left alone with your children. To struggle the best you can. Ah, yes, it's a hard life. Sometimes I've wanted to speak to her, but then I think: she knows the story as well as I do. It won't do any good, she'll do what she wants, and it's her life to live."

The potatoes were piling up. She smiled. "Almost enough. Now my other two daughters have married well. One with a French boy from Chambly. Leota met him when she was visiting her father's people. They're living there now with her grandparents. My father-in-law didn't like stonecutting. He went back to the farm in Canada after a few years. The other girl is married to an Italian. He sells insurance here in Barre.

"I've lived here all my life. I could have moved to Quincy when I married. My husband had an offer from a shed down there. 7 But I was satisfied with Barre. It's just large enough,

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the stores are good, and it's always been lively enough for the children. The only fault I find with Barre is that there aren't enough jobs in town for the young people when they get out of high school. Many of them get office jobs in Montpelier, the rest have to go to larger cities. Not many of the high school boys go into the sheds. You can't blame them. There's no future for them there now.

"I don't know much about the big strike. I used to. My husband struck along with the rest of them. I used to hear him talk about it a lot, but you hear so little about it now that I've forgotten. I do remember my husband saying that some of the unskilled French who came in to break the strike could be excused. That was quite a statement from my husband, he was as much against them as anybody. One of those strike breakers was a friend of his. They'd grown up together in Chambly, good friends. He hadn't seen or heard from him for years, then all of a sudden he sees him parading through town with the rest of them. My husband was dazed, he could hardly believe it. This friend, Pete was his name, came up to the house to see my husband the next day.

"Perhaps Pete's story is the same as many of those strangers' who came into Barre. I don't know. Pete was badly in need of money. His farm, like so many other French farms that year, wasn't paying. The crops amounted to nothing. He had a wife and three children to feed. He could see no signs of work for him in Chambly. Not for months. Then this opportunity for work in Barre came to him. Work meant keeping his family together. 8 Can you blame him for accepting it? I don't. He'd never worked in granite. He'd heard, of course, of Barre and the granite workers. But he knew of them vaguely, just as he knew of miners and steel workers. I mean, how hard the work was, and dangerous. But he had to be amongst the workers, live with them and do their work, before he could really appreciate the fact that they needed a strike to better their conditions. I haven't seen much of him since my husband died. But I know he's a Union man now, and a good one"

Mrs. Lachance called to her daughter that the potatoes were ready. She leaned back in her chair and began to rock lazily, comfortably. "You know," she said, "the longer you live

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in this world the better you realize there are always two sides to a question. And it isn't fair to judge until you study both sides. I wasn't thinking only of the Strike. Right now I'm thinking of an Italian woman who lives down the street. She sells beer and wine. She's had to pay a fine twice for selling without a license. She still sells. Some of the neighbors look down on her. They don't want their children to play with hers. Her husband died a few years ago. His lungs. He was a stonecutter. She has six children. None of them big enough to be working. Her hip was badly crushed the year after her husband died. What could she do? It's hard for her to get around. There aren't many kinds of work she can do. The easiest way—so it seemed to her—was to sell liquor in her own house. That way she could be at home all the time to look after her children. It's illegal. But there's her side, too. She wants her children. She's proud. She doesn't want charity. 9 She does Italian baking, too. That brings in a little money.” Mrs. Lachance sighed. “I don't blame her.”

3. Spanish Stonecutter's Widow.

She was a large, swarthy-faced woman. Heavy black hair was drawn to a shiny coil low on her neck. Today she was crocheting an edge for a linen tablecloth.

“I have crocheted for so long now that I can make my own patterns.” Mrs. Vialez held up her work for inspection. “No, not this one. This one I make for a woman on Barclay Hill. A rich woman. She show me the pattern from the book and she say, 'Go ahead and make this one, I will pay what you ask.' She pays good. I do work for her for twenty years. My husband used to cut stone for her husband. Me, I used to clean her house once a week. After my husband die, this lady did not forget me. I used to take my crocheted work from house to house to try to sell it. She bought some.

“I had three children. She say it was too hard for me to go from house to house. Sometimes I had to take the youngest baby with me. She say I would make more money if I stay home, and if people want the crocheted work they would come and order it. She

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speaking the truth. I have made enough to raise the three children. The two girls are married. The boy is working in the woods in Bakersfield, near the lumber mills.

"I have been in America twenty-seven years this August. Me and my husband are both born in [Biesca?], Spain. On the Ebro 10 River. That is a pretty river for you. Near our town the river is narrow and deep. It flows past rocks that are a little like granite, but not good enough to work. They got big streaks of yellow, red, and orange. From far away they look pretty. But you get close and you see that they are dirty from the years that water has run over them. All summer small blue flowers grow between the rocks. I never see anything like them in America. They are shaped like daisies and very, very blue, but in the center where the daisies are yellow, these are pure white.

"We lived just three hours' carriage ride from Saragossa. That is where my husband learned to cut granite. A large city with many beautiful buildings, it makes ten or twelve of Barre. He cut stone from the day he was seventeen. We are married sixteen months when we decide to come to America. To Barre. Another stonecutter and his wife from our town come with us. We take the train to Bilbao, and from there the boat. I didn't like that boat and I didn't like the trip. I was used to riding only in a wagon or carriage, and that boat it made me sick all the time. I carried my first baby then. She is born four months after we got to Barre. All that trip I am sick enough to die. I want to be alone, but even that I couldn't have. The stonecutter and his wife from our town share our room, and besides them there are two other couples.

"I am too sick to bother to look at New York. My husband used to say it was a lot like Saragossa. But, he was so busy to take care of me that he didn't see much himself. Besides, he was always saying that when you look quick and short at big cities they all look the same. 11 "My husband was a good artist, more for pictures than for stone, I think. In Spain there is a picture of our river that he painted, and a good picture of his school teacher. When we left Spain both of them were hanging in the school house. Many times I have wished that he kept at his painting instead of granite.

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"He used to earn extra money in the sheds. When a customer was not satisfy with the designs the boss show, then he ask my husband to draw some special ones at home at night. Many times he do this and the boss was very please with him.

"When my first baby is born he draw a picture of a beautiful bedspread. All in roses, a chain of roses. Together we figure out how many and what kind of stitches to make to crochet it. Everybody like it very much. My first girl is married five years ago. For a present I make a spread just like the first one.

"My husband die from pneumonia at the time of the influenza. But the doctor say that if his lungs were not already full with dust, maybe he would have got well. It was hard for me to get, along after he die.

"I learn to crochet in the old country. There was a convent of white veil nuns just outside of Biesca. Every Saturday they give lessons free to anybody who want to go. Sewing, crocheting, linen work. Their work is the best I have ever see. The linens they send to the cathedrals in the big cities. Alter linens. I always say it is lucky for me that I learn to do this work. How else then could I support myself and three children, except that I scrub floors and do hard work 12 all the time?

"I have people left in Spain. I think I have. I have not heard now for two, three years. The people of my husband, they stop from writing just as soon as he die, so them I don't count. My own father and mother are a long time dead. There is only a brother over there, and I don't know if he is dead or alive. I don't hear from the ltetters I writs, I don't get them back, I don't know what to think. There is nothing there for me now. This in my home. As long as I got my eyes and my hands I can earn enough money here to pay my rent and live pretty good, I am satisfy."

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4. An Irish Shed Owner's Widow.

The house, a large terreted wooden structure, stood in a quiet residential street close to the city's business section. Irises lined a stone path to the kitchen door, shrubbery bordered the front walk.

"I was born here in Vermont," Mrs. McCarthy said. "But John, my husband, came over from Ireland. He was already owner of the shed when I met and married him. People said he had a fine future, he was a good workman himself and he understood the business thoroughly. He was a hardworking, sober young man them days. We were happy. He talked granite day and night. I didn't mind. It was good to see him so interested in the business. It all changed when his uncle died. His uncle had been a carver in Ireland, a skilled one. He'd worked 13 in Barre only five years when his lungs went bad. He and John were very close friends. His sickness was a blow to John. It seemed to loose some devil in him. He began to drink heavily. Pretty soon it was every day. It wasn't unusual to see a couple of his workman half carrying him home after the shed closed for the day.

"Of course, business suffered. It had to with a drunken mind supervising it. I tried to talk to him. I told him I understood the friendship between him and his uncle, but nothing could bring him back. He had to think of the living. He had to think of his wife and his three children. He wouldn't listen. When one of his employees, a good friend of his, was forced to leave work, too, because of his lungs, it was more than John could bear. He drank more than ever. I suggested putting a manager in the shed. He wouldn't hear of it. Business became so bad that we had to borrow money on the house to put into the shed. We borrowed twice.

"I loved this home. We'd bought it from the people who built it. They owned the old hotel on Main Street. It was torn down years ago. I liked the privacy of this house. But a seventeen room house for five people was a burden in those times when little money was coming in. It could be an asset. I saw my duty even though it was a painful one, and I did it. John

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was so deep in liquor he never even raised a finger to stop me. I went up to the shed one afternoon and talked to every one of the unmarried men. I explained the situation to them, though God knows they must have known it, and told them I would be glad to have any of them as roomers. They were good men, 14 they were eager to help. By the end of the next week six were rooming at the house—three Irish; two Scotch, and one Italian. “The extra money was a God-send. I went further. I boarded those men. It was hard work even with a maid, but it was worth it.

“I had hoped that my willingness to cooperate and my example would straighten John. It didn't. He let go completely. He didn't die of stonecutters' t. b., it was drinking that killed him. But I can't help feeling that the granite industry which had taken his uncle and his friend was indirectly responsible.

“After his death one of John's best workman assured me that under his management the shed could again be operated on a paying basis. He was a sober minded man and trustworthy, but I'd had enough of the granite industry. I felt it had robbed me of a husband, and the children or a father. I was eager to sever all association with it. I sold the shed, and paid back part of the money we'd borrowed on the house.

“I kept the roomers. The children were growing, I wanted to give them a good education. Neither of the boys lives in Vermont now. One became an electrical engineer, the other a doctor. They have both done well. My daughter married a local merchant.

“About twenty years ago she, her husband, and two children came to live with me. She wanted privacy as much as I did, we gave up the roomers. She and her husband paid off the rest of the mortgage. Part of the house really belongs to them now. It's just as well that way. I don't think the boys will ever come back to Vermont. Not to live. They've families of their 15 own.

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“There are eight of us in this house now. Five grandchildren, my daughter and son-in-law and myself. The children are grown. The oldest girl graduated from college last year; the youngest boy will finish high school next year.

“The three grandsons know that their grandfather was in the granite business. They don't seem to be interested in it. I'm glad of that. I seldom speak to them of those past years.”